If not claimed within 14 days please return to the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club Inc.
PO Box 8663, Alice Springs, NT 0871

February 2007

Alice Springs Field Naturalists Club

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Web site : www.geocities.com/alicenats

Meetings

7.30 pm on the second Wednesday of the month.

Venue: Olive Pink Botanic Garden, Tuncks Road.

14th February Speaker Mike Barritt "The Story of World Extinctions."

14th March Speaker Chris Palmer, Entomologist. Second instalment with "Higher Order Insects".

Trips / Activities

Sun 4th Feb. Sunrise on Spencer Hill. Meet at Gosse Street Playground at 5.30 am. Leader Rosalie Breen. Contact 8952 3409.

Sat 10th Feb. Birdwatching at Sewage Ponds. Meet 7am at entrance off Commonage Road, turn left just before gate to the Rubbish Dump. Breakfast at Olive Pink Botanic Gardens. See below.

INVITATION from Bob Read.

All my friends from the Field Nats are invited to a morning tea at Olive Pink Botanic Garden on the morning of Sat. 10th of February at 10 am (after the excursion to the Sewage Ponds) to celebrate a special birthday I would rather forget.
Light refreshments will be provided.
Please RSVP (for catering purposes) by email: rlread1@bigpond.net.au or telephone 8952 1935 by 7th Feb.
No presents please. Hope to see you there.
Bob

Fri 16th Feb. BBQ at 6pm followed by night walk at Old Telegraph Station.

Sun Mar 4th Walk in Kurrajong Hills. Leader Rosalie Breen. Contact 8952 3409

Sat 10th March. Visit to Kyumba Reserve. Leader Connie Spencer. Contact 8952 4694

Sat 17th March. Miss Pink's Birthday Celebrations at Olive Pink Botanic Garden.

New Members

Welcome back to Kevin Boyle, and to new member Jo Smith.

Guest Speaker Report

INTRODUCTION TO INSECTS

Presented by Chris Palmer
Entomologist with Parks and Wildlife Department

Wed 8th November 2006
by Barb Gilfedder

It seems an entomologist will never run out of species to study.

It is estimated that there are between three and 80 million insect species globally, of which only about one million have been described. This number of described species, Chris told us, is more than the combined total of species in all other groups combined. That is more than the total of bacteria, fungi, vertebrates, other invertebrates and plants.

In Australia it is estimated that there are at least 205 000 insect species of which 60 000 have been described.

Staggering numbers!

Why so many?

Well, being small is good for exploiting niches; they have complex sensory and locomotor make-up; they have co-evolved with plants; adults are mobile often with wings and they have a short generation time allowing them to quickly adapt to different circumstances.

Insects form integral components of balanced ecosystems. They help maintain plant and animal communities, by feeding on them, as disease vectors, pollinating, or parasitising other organisms, and also by recycling nutrients. They themselves are also regulated by other things. particularly by being food for many larger animals.

Insects are divided into 30 different groups called orders.

These orders are divided into 'lower' orders – those whose immature stages (nymphs) are similar to the adults... and 'higher' orders, who go through complete metamorphosis like butterflies, whose immature stages are very different from the adults.

Chris then went through each of these 'lower' orders, describing briefly the characteristics of each order and showing us photos as examples and filling in with interesting facts.

Dragonflies are stout while sharing their order are damselflies which are slender.

Lord Howe Island stick insects are large and flightless. They were thought to be extinct, having been eaten by introduced rats on the Island. They were then discovered on Balls Pyramid, a sharp point of rock sticking out of the ocean. They feed on a stunted melaleuca bush which struggles to maintain a hold on a steep rock face.

Lord Howe Island stick insect
Dryococelus australis

True bugs are a large group which include cicadas, scales, lerps, aphids, tree hoppers, and assassin bugs.

Also the large water scorpions that we had been watching in the shallow pools at Simpsons Gap the previous week. Most use their piercing, sucking mouthparts to feed on plants but the assassin bugs are exclusively predatory. We had an example of an assassin bug nymph Connie had brought in from the Desert Park nursery where it had been found in some seed.

Heelwalkers were another order that Chris told us about. They do not occur in Australia, being restricted to South Africa and Namibia. The amazing thing was they were only described as a new order five years ago. They are wingless predators and similar to mantids and stick insects. The name comes from the fact that they do not walk on the last segments of their legs but the ones before. Although specimens of the 13 now described species had been collected over many years, scientists had not previously realised that they did not fit into known orders. Namibia has produced a stamp depicting the now famous heelwalker. An image of it is also being used as a logo for the next world entomology conference.

Pretty amazing to describe a new species but a whole new order is certainly something special in the insect world.... and it seems there are plenty more to be described.

We thank Chris for an interesting talk and look forward to part 2 when he will continue with the 'higher'or

Trip Reports

FROGWATCH BUT NOT FROGS
Simpson Gap

Fri 3rd Nov 2006
By Rosalie Breen

A lot of interesting creatures were living in the waters of the small remnant pools. On the bottom were many groups of fine yellowy-brown threads ceaselessly waving, like a forest of sea grass blowing in the wind. (I know it is a mixed metaphor but I reckon that is a good description). They are sludge worms most likely belonging to the family Tubificidae one of the segmented worms (class Oligochaeta). Each segment of the worm, except for some of the back ones, bear four bundles of bristles or setae, thought to aid locomotion. These slender worms often live in large colonies as we saw, with their head stuck in the mud in a short tube, their tails waving to create a current to draw in fresh oxygen. Many are coloured red due to a respiratory pigment erythrocruorin in their blood which is efficient in making use of limited oxygen. These factors enable them to live in even heavily polluted waters. They feed by ingesting the sediments and extracting the organic matter, bacteria and algae, and passing out the inorganic material.

Leeches were spotted gliding in the water by contracting and extending in length, or with undulating movements of their body. These have a sucker on both ends. The bigger diving beetle could be seen rising to the surface, his abdomen breaking the surface and collecting another bubble of air under his elytra (wing). Then he rapidly disappeared down into the algae (spirogyra) again. Other beetles were seen and waterboatman too. A water scorpion with his long breathing tube out the back and big forelimbs adapted for seizing his prey was sitting quietly on the algae just below the surface. Spiders scuttled across the surface of the water being light enough not to break the surface tension. Other little specks and spots swam around but defied identification without a microscope. Small black water snails were in abundance. They seem to increase in numbers too as the water dries up. Snails are herbivorous grazing on the water plants or algae.

BIRD WATCHING
Sewage Ponds

Saturday 18th November 2006
By Connie Spencer

As I write this report, it is over 8 weeks since our bird watching morning at the sewage ponds. The memory is a little hazy to say the least! New Year's resolution – write up trip reports immediately. It must have been a reasonably pleasant morning temperature wise as according to my diary I rode my bike to the ponds. Other bird-watchers were, Bob, Barb, Kevin, Liz, Beth (on her way to the airport – leaving us once again), Jo Smith & a visitor whose name I can't remember. I hope I haven't missed anyone.

We walked along the banks of the ponds with Bob, Barb & Liz pointing out the various species. Barb set up her scope so that we could get better views.

Barb's scope Photo: Connie Spencer

By the end of our walk I had 30 different birds listed in my notebook with my favourites being the very vocal, swooping Avocets and the striking Black-fronted Dotterels. I'll remember the Pink-eared Duck. Forget about looking for the pink ears and go for the unmistakable zebra striped flank. Bob advised that an old name for the duck was Zebra Duck – a much more appropriate common name to me. Don't think I'll ever get my head around all the Sandpipers!

As we said our goodbyes, Kevin renewed his membership and Jo joined up, making treasurer Barb an extra happy birdwatcher.

Thanks to all for their company and another pleasant Field Naturalists Club outing.

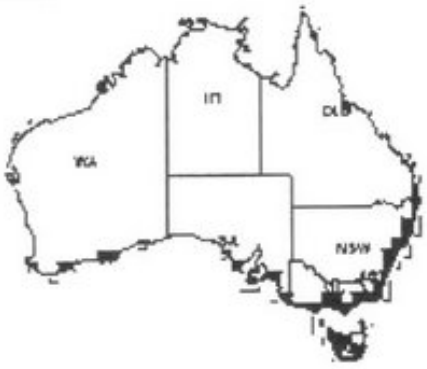
Creature Feature

"SHEARWATER SLAUGHTER"

By Rhondda Tomlinson

This may seem an unusual title for an article submitted to the Alice Springs Field Naturalists Newsletter.
Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuostris* or Mutton Birds migrate annually from their feeding grounds in

the Arctic and North -western Pacific to their nesting sites in Tasmania and parts of the Australian mainland.



Recently while on holidays in Tasmania my sister and I stayed at the Devonport YHA where we heard about the Lillico Beach Conservation Area. This is a protected area fenced off from the road and managed by the Parks and Wildlife of Tasmania and a very active group of volunteers. They have set up a viewing platform area where after sunset people are welcome to come and see the Fairy Penguins *Eudyptula minor* come ashore to their nesting areas. We also saw many Shearwater birds returning to their nests to tend their eggs in the scrub along the sand dunes.

Short-tailed Shearwater Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

While talking to the duty volunteer he told us about the slaughter of the Shearwater and asked if we could pass the information on as to what is happening to these majestic courageous birds.

The Shearwater makes and annual 30,000km round migratory journey from the Artic and northwestern Pacific regions, which are their feeding grounds to Tasmania to nest and rear their young. There are about 209 breeding colonies around Tasmania and its islands. The chicks grow quickly and reach almost twice the weight of an adult before the adults depart for warmer climates. The chicks follow their parents unattended or guided 3 weeks later. (There is some quite interesting reading on these birds on the internet).

Short-tailed Shearwater Photo: Rhondda Tomlinson

The Tasmanian Government issues commercial catchers licenses to indigenous Tasmanians to continue their traditional practices, however it also issues hundreds of recreational licenses during the open season. In this latter time many young chicks are slaughtered by barbaric means and damage is done to nests and dunes which would normally be utilized year after year. The Shearwater does not breed until it reaches 5 years of age and then only has one chick per year.

These birds in all states in Australia except Tasmania (where a large proportion of the breeding grounds are) are protected by the Japan/Australian Migratory Birds Agreement.

BOOK REVIEW
By Bob Read

"The Complete Field Guide to Dragonflies of Australia", by Theischinger and Hawking.
Published by CSIRO Publishing, about $50.

I told my good wife that I did not want anything for Christmas. When I saw this book I changed my mind.

The book exceeds its title, being a complete guide to dragonflies and damselflies as well. It is the second such book (after butterflies), for a group of Australian insect species.

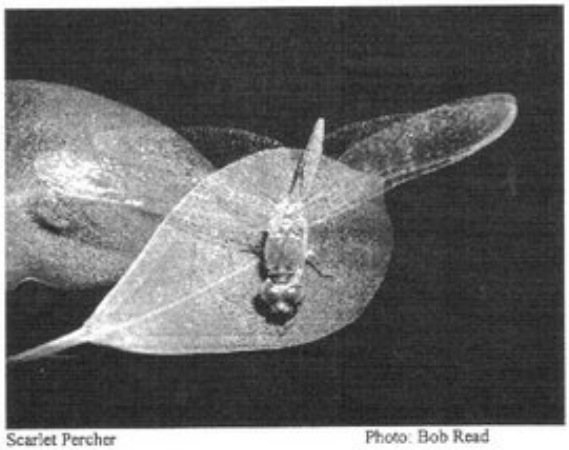
The book is well illustrated with many fine photos of creatures in their habitat, with the gaps being filled by photos of preserved specimens. The photos are augmented by brief descriptions of distinguishing

features, accompanied by simple line drawings that greatly help understanding.

There are keys for both adults and final instar larvae. Most steps in the key are accompanied by pairs of line drawings. These and the illustrated glossary are admirable features that will be of greatly appreciated by anyone who has ever struggled to understand the obscure technical language in which keys are written. The distribution maps have been simplified to presence or absence in broad regions, with our area being lumped in the largest of these. While less precise than the blobs characteristic of field guides this should be adequate and is probably the best that is possible on present knowledge.

This is an excellent book. Together with a digital camera it should now be feasible for the amateur to identify most dragonflies without the need to take specimens. Be warned however that there are only about a dozen species of dragonflies and damselflies likely to be found in our region.

BOB'S DRAGONFLY



Scarlet Percher Photo: Bob Read

Scarlet Percher (*Diplacodes haematodes*). The males of this species are brightly coloured, hence both the common and scientific names. The species ranges throughout mainland Australia and to Timor, New Guinea and New Caledonia. In my garden 20/8/2006.

LETTER FROM JANE DANNE

My treatment is progressing with only some nausea and discomfort. Also, I'm reading up on how diet affects cancer and making a few changes - need to feel I can be proactive. However, the lengthy treatment time is a bit of a problem - in regards to keeping positive and motivated. And I worry I won't be able to remember how to nurse! 4 or 5 months before I can really hope to be working FULL time again, though I do hope I can start some part time work soon.

I've joined the Geelong Field Nat's and will start meeting them and getting to meetings/outings in Feb. In the mean time, have been doing a few things through the Marine Discovery Centre. They are running some summer activities like snorkling, slide and talk evenings, excursions out into the bay, and I've been joining in where I can. I was snorkling out in the middle of Port Phillip Bay yesterday - at "Pope's Eye", a man-made shallow area which has become a wonderland of reef life. The above water level structures have been taken over by a large breeding population of Gannets - beautiful birds with amazing diving & fishing abilities and youngsters who grow to be as big as themselves in a very short time making them look very funny - huge fluffy white balls barely fitting into the nest. There was a mother and pup Australian Fur Seal there yesterday. They got into the water when they saw us snorkling and swam around near by - very inquisitive, friendly animals.

Best wishes,
Jane D.

LETTER FROM VANUATU

Hi Bob,
It was really nice to get an email from you, home and all our friends are never far from our thoughts. We are enjoying our selves in Port Vila, although it hasn't been an easy 6 months, mostly because our office wasn't functioning very well and had a few problems when we arrived. But it's getting much better now and we are getting on very well with the local staff.

We've had plenty of opportunities for travel - Emily has been to PNG, Samoa, Fiji and the Solomon Islands. I've been to the Maldives again, and also to PNG. We spend most of our travel time working, but have travelled to some remote villages and had some amazing experiences. The highlight is usually the people who you meet, who are usually incredibly generous despite their poverty.

Haven't seen much wildlife - few Pacific Boas in Port Vila, but unfortunately the locals kill them on sight, so I've only seen one juvenile live one. The marine life is interesting - plenty of turtles including Hawksbills which are really nice to see. There are plenty of birds, but no local bird books - frustrating, but nice to see anyway. We have a couple of types of emerald green doves that visit our yard, a kingfisher and honey eaters. The only feral is the Indian Miner - and fortunately no Cane Toads!

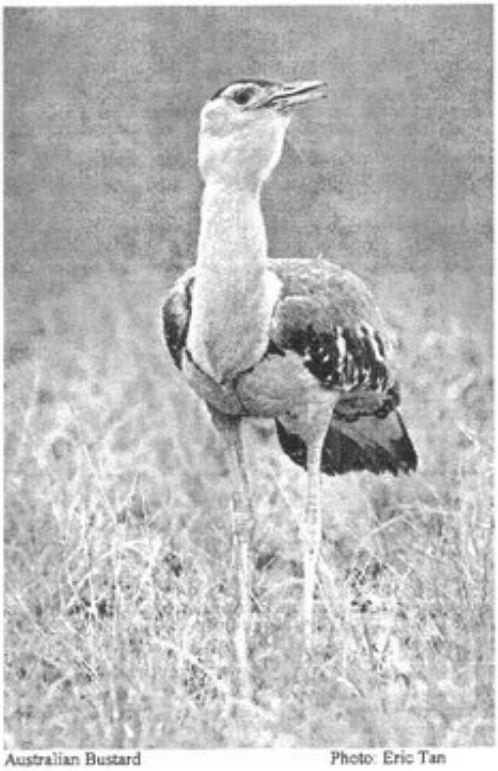
I'm attempting to organise a walk in Papua New Guinea in May 2007 We are intending to walk from

the Northern side of west New Britain (near Kimbe) to the south (near Gasmata). It will be about 6 days walking in rainforest across the Whiteman Ranges. I'd love to carry a few elliot traps and a spotlight. Hope everything is going well in Alice, please pass on our regards to all at the Field Nats

Cheers for now,
Robbie & Emily

NEWS FROM DERBY

Eric Tan advises his birding friends that he now lives in a mangrove swamp and has added 80 birds to his list since arriving in Derby in late November 2006. He periodically gets "banished" to Fitzroy Crossing for work. However, he has managed to get to Broome and learned to deal with the tides that creep up on him.



Australian Bustard Photo: Eric Tan

Yellow Chat Photo: Eric Tan

Copy Deadline for articles for next newsletter
Friday 2nd March 2007